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Out of Africa – a revitalized church

Daniel Abba CSSp

Provincial of the Nigeria North-West Spiritan Province

The Spiritan Congregation has grown a lot in Nigeria. Before 2010, when we were divided into four Provinces, Nigeria had become the largest single Province in the Congregation. The four Provinces continue to grow year by year and Nigeria South East is now the largest Spiritan Province worldwide. We thank God for our many vocations even when our continual growth challenges us to look for ways to cope with such increase.

I grew up in a religious family that talked about church and mission and also had a love for the priesthood and religious life as a way of serving God and humanity.

All four Provinces work together, especially in the areas of Formation and Mission. Many Nigerian Spiritans work outside their country too, in Africa, North and South America, and Europe.

In the Nigerian church there exists an attraction to the priesthood and religious life. I want to believe that Christianity has found a home in Africa, and especially in Nigeria. I grew up in a religious family that talked about church and mission and also had a love for the priesthood and religious life as a way of serving God and humanity. It was part of an evolution — people wanted to donate themselves to serve God and humanity through the priesthood and religious life. I became more and more convinced that I wanted to join them in this endeavour.

The church in Canada and Nigeria

It's difficult to know why there isn't the same attraction towards the church in North America. I appreciate the church

in Canada — it's much more alive than the church in Europe. I've spent time in Western Canada and it's amazing when you go to church there and compare it to some parts of Europe. In Western Canada you see a lot of young people coming to church — and yet they represent only a small percentage of the Catholics in that area.

In Nigeria it's more of a total family thing. There the family has a big role to play in the life of an individual. You don't want to go outside the family until you "find your foot on the ground." Part of finding your foot on the ground and part of family culture is to worship, to pray. Young people have inherited that from their family and want to keep to it even when they leave home.

God has a hand in it

We know that God has created us. We need to worship God. Whatever we are today, whatever we'll be tomorrow, God has a hand in it. Even the wealthiest of our people, even the most intelligent among them, still give glory to God for life. We may be able to do a lot of things, but we know that it is God who gives us the ability to do those things. That brings the church very much into our culture. That is why God is so much alive in the different African cultures.

In our culture when one has done something great and people say, "Thank you, we're happy for you", the common response is, "It is the Lord's doing. Thanks be to God. It's not me, it's God." People always give credit to God for what they are able to do. It is one way that God is fully alive in that culture.

Even in the African secular world God has a role to play. If you find a job, you thank God. If you pass your exams, you thank God. Even though you know that you have to study in order to pass your exams, you still believe that the greater part of the work is done by God. Yes, we have to do our part so

"The more we know about Africa the more we'll know about the Catholic future writ large."

John Allen, National Catholic Reporter

that God can achieve what he intends to achieve through us. We are part of that plan. That's the way we look at it.

Nigerian Spiritans

Nigerian Spiritans are primarily missionaries in Africa. A small but significant number go overseas, but the majority work in Africa. There is a very small number in Canada and the USA. But Nigerian Spiritans are to be found in many of the European Spiritan Provinces. The majority are engaged in parish work, but there are some in other ministries also — quite a number in the British Province work with youth and refugees, especially in Manchester. There are also Spiritans working in prison ministry.

In Africa this is also the case — appointed to a parish, a Spiritan might find himself involved in a variety of ministries: youth, prison ministry, teaching, schools. But the base is the parish. The African church, based in the parish, is more or less a family affair. Even though you may be in school or someplace else, you come from a family. And this family is regularly present in the parish. As a priest you meet people in church and then you meet them again in the regular ministries you are engaged in.

Our African Spiritans in Germany, Holland, Ireland, Belgium are very surprised when they come to church: they don't see many people there. They find it difficult when many of the people they meet in other places and on other occasions are not interested in church. On the other hand, among those who don't go to church they find a very strong devotion — including among young people. There are still many people who are very Christian even if they are no longer churchgoers.

Challenges to African Spiritans

The dwindling number of new Spiritans, especially in Europe, and the dwindling financial support from Europe for African Spiritans present two ongoing challenges.

Europe has been our strength ever since 1703. It still remains our financial strength. But the older people become, the more there are challenges for the home Provinces. These, in turn, affect the entire Congregation — financial resources that might have been available for younger Provinces are now needed to take care of the elderly in Europe. New areas and new vocations in Africa, Asia, South America can no longer depend on Europe to the same extent for financial support.

Speaking as an African, there is a challenge of integration. Even though we are an international Congregation, we tend to nationalize it according to our country of origin e.g. Ireland, France, Germany, Nigeria. So when a Province says that it is dying out, it is inclined to think that means the whole Congregation is dying out. Yes, we may be dying out in Europe — but we are more than Europe. After all we are a Catholic Church and a Catholic Congregation — not just a European Congregation.

We hope that we will shift to that more inclusive mentality. Our new General Council — whose members come from

Nigerian Spiritans in Canada



Daniel Abba

Obinna Ifeanyi

Oliver Iwuchukwu

David Okenyi

Ireland, Quebec, France, Nigeria, Tanzania, Portugal — renews our hope that we will remain catholic in our outlook.

Africa's contribution towards a revitalized church

What will Africa bring to the Catholic world? How will the church benefit from being more African?

Once a culture exports missionaries, it exports itself too — maybe not completely. For the African to go to Europe or North or South America and make Africans of those people would be to repeat the mistake we ourselves frown upon.

When I sit with Canadians and listen to them I find there is not much difference between their way of life and our way of life. "My family, my children and my grandchildren" are what

There are still many people who are very Christian even if they are no longer churchgoers.

mark a life in Africa. So when I see a man or woman in Canada whose interest is in their children or grandchildren — I admire that a lot. This is something that we have in common.

Young people in Europe and North America don't seem to want to go to church because they feel there's no life there. They speak of it as dead. But the charismatic character of the Nigerian or African church, if allowed to come back, not in an extreme way (we have had extreme charismatic practices which the church has frowned at) might enable other churches elsewhere to rekindle some vibrant life. Young people want to feel alive. They don't want to come and sit down and listen. They want to sing, to clap their hands, to dance, to feel happy. They want to speak out. Africa has that at the moment. Nigeria especially has a demonstrative aspect to its worship — we sing, we clap hands, we dance. We don't keep it in, we express it and that expression entices people to participate.

You pray that way, and you go out of church feeling you've done something. My feeling is that a similar approach would bring back life to European and North American churches too. If something of that is welcomed and encouraged, the parishes will be able to get back their young people and so bring the church itself back to life.

Our educational ministry in Nigeria

We have so many local diocesan priests that we don't need missionaries. But every church needs to have a religious congregation in its community.

When the missionaries came, one of the things that they brought along with them, and which the people warmly embraced, was education. During the civil war in Nigeria, when the schools were taken away from the church, a lot of missionaries were expelled. Today's Nigerian public school system has run-down schools — mainly due to corruption.

Now that we have the opportunity to build schools again, education is becoming a very important part of our ministry. We feel that the education we have in Nigeria today is not right, not

strong enough. The four Spiritan Provinces in Nigeria are trying to invest in schools and to evangelize through the schools.

We want to channel our resources into education. Out of approximately 170 million people, Nigeria has a teeming young population that loves to study. We need personnel to reach out to as many of them as we can.

Christians in the north find themselves very scattered. Two of our four Spiritan Provinces are there, but our numbers are still very small. We want to be with our people. We want to walk with them through their sufferings and the killings inflicted on them. Both Muslims and Christians have suffered from the current situation. Being with and walking with both groups is a big challenge in Nigeria today. ■

Religions in Canada – 2011 Census

Roman Catholics, roughly 12,726,900 or 28.5% of overall immigrants, were the largest Christian group, although their numbers decreased from 41.3% before 1971 to 22.5% between 2001-2011. Catholics make up 38.7% of the total population of Canada. United Church members, about 2,007,600, were the second largest group of Christians.

Just over 22.1 million people, two-thirds of Canada's population of 34,482,779, reported that they were affiliated with a Christian religion.

Quebec remained Canada's most Catholic province at 74.7% of the population. 45% of Canada's Roman Catholics were in Quebec and 31% in Ontario.

1 out of 5 people in Canada's population were foreign-born. In Toronto 2 out of 5 Catholics were immigrants whereas in the rest of Canada the proportion of Catholics to total population was 1 in 10. In Toronto Mass is offered in 36 languages every Sunday. Filipino immigrants account for the majority of Mass-goers.

Orthodox believers represent 1.7% of Canada's population.

Christians still make up the largest share of recent immigrants. 41.7% of them came between 2001-2005 and 47.5% between 2006-2011.

Slightly over 1,000,000 individuals identified themselves as Muslims, representing 3.2% of the total population. The largest share of Muslim immigrants between 2006-2011 came from Pakistan.

Hindus represented 1.5%, Sikhs 1.4%, Buddhists 1.1% and Jews 1.0% of the population. Recent Hindu and Sikh immigrants came mainly from India. Most Buddhists came from China. China was also the top source country for immigrants with no religious affiliation.

Just over 64,900 — 4.5% of the Aboriginal population or .2% of the population as a whole — reported affiliation with traditional Aboriginal spirituality.

24% of Canadians had no religious affiliation — an increase from 16.5% in 2001 and 12% in 1991.

Church attendance

Large numbers of people ... haven't shut the door on religion. 51% of the population are receptive to greater involvement if they can find it worthwhile.

It's not the job of the sheep to find the shepherds, but the shepherds to find the sheep ...

Immigration will remain a boon to the Catholic Church in Canada ...

Most Catholics actually wander back on their own every once in a while. They show up in amazing regularity ... Even when Roman Catholics think they have lost people they still have them.

Those who need to attend weekly services out of a sense of obligation will now tend to go if they feel their minds are uplifted, otherwise they won't bother.

*Reginald Bibby
University of Lethbridge Sociologist
(Talk at St Paul University, Ottawa, April 2013)*